

Babel Babble

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Language Conflicts: Flemish vs. Walloon

Many of us who study languages do so in the hopes of crossing the bridge of understanding into other cultures. Through learning another language, we can learn another way of life. But what happens when cultures clash because of language differences? These conflicts can range from simple distrust and anger to outright war and destruction.

Belgium is a country that is torn by language, although it is on the lesser extreme of the conflict spectrum. The country is a convergence point of both Latin and Germanic cultures, having been ravished by many greater nations over the centuries. The Spanish, Austrians, French and Dutch, each one marching into Belgium, battling with other nations, and plundering the land has ruled it.

The French Revolution had Belgium annexed to France. When the Napoleon led French army was finally defeated in 1815, Belgium was forced to merge with Holland. Finally, in 1830, the Belgians were able to rid themselves of the Dutch control and declare their independence. They chose an uncle of Queen Victoria, Leopold I, as the nation's first King. However, the country's troubles were far from over.



"Belgium" wasn't even known by that name. Instead, its regions were named by the major count ruled "counties" and duke ruled "duchies", such as Hainaut, Brabant, and Flanders. The name "Belgium" comes from the Roman named "Belgii" tribes of northeast Gaul.

Today, it is divided primarily along its Latin and Germanic heritage. The Latin-evolved language of French has prominence in the region known as "Wallonia", and the dialect of French spoken there is called "Walloon". The Germanic-based language Dutch has its place in the northern areas, and its dialect is called "Flemish". There is also a rising German presence along the borders of Germany, just to make things more interesting.



These "linguistic lines" are very obvious throughout most of the country. In some areas, you can literally cross the street and go from a Flemish to a Walloon neighborhood. Everything changes between those: the spoken language, signs, billboards, etc. Even while driving along the highways, you can see the names of the locations on the signs changing, depending which "section" you are in. This can be very confusing to.. well.. just about anyone.

Each region has its own administration and government. Public libraries, firehouses, unions, even churches are all duplicated between the Flemish and Walloon languages. The country's capital Brussels is in the Flemish northern half, and is supposed to remain bi-lingual, but is predominately French. Dual-language signs do exist, but they are often the targets of graffiti, which is used to deface one of the two languages.

The conflict between the two sides has been expanding over recent events, including the introduction of French-speaking cable TV and a festival of French films, the latter of which was cancelled due to a demonstration of a Flemish group in the school the festival was to be held.



Both sides, Flemish and Walloon, want to become the dominant one in controlling the country. Compromises have continued to keep the balance in check without leading to violence, but how long that remains is unknown.

Perhaps the biggest issue is economics. Wallonia is mired in the country's old industrial structure, which has made it difficult to compete in the modern marketplace, while Flanders had been actively modernizing its microelectronics industry and rivals the US Silicon Valley.



So how do you end a language-based conflict? Perhaps we will gain some insight into this question in the next installment of this series on Language Conflicts.

If you have opinions, comments, or corrections on this article, please don't hesitate to send them to us at bb@unilang.org.